

**DOROTHY GILLIAM****DOROTHY GILLIAM**

## Building a Love To Help Us Heal

**A**yoy Handy exudes friendliness and cheerfulness. Although no more than 5 feet 2 inches tall, there is a largeness in her manner, a big loving spirit that embraces everyone she meets.

She is a familiar figure in some of Washington's inner-city neighborhoods, working with children, teenagers and adults, fighting against the odds trying to make things better. Ayo, the community organizer.

"I was heading home on the bus, inspired after seeing 'Malcolm X,' and the idea came to me: 'Black Love Day'... create an alternative to Valentine's Day and call it 'Black Love Day,'" she explained the other afternoon, pushing long dreadlocks off a dark chocolate-colored forehead.

She gave me a handful of fliers that so proclaimed Feb. 13 and listed dozens of activities that will take place today at the first annual conference at McKinley Senior High School.

"Romantic love is not enough for Valentine's Day," she said. "We need more. We need a wholistic approach to all our loving relationships."

A shadow appeared in her hooded eyes as she recalled her own struggle with that most basic and challenging love relationship of all—loving one's self.

A native Washingtonian, Ayo was born in 1951. A graduate of Anacostia Senior High, she was 19 years old when she joined her high school sweetheart at his post at Naha Air Force Base in Okinawa. It was a year's travel that changed her life forever. She married, experienced "overnight

See GILLIAM, B2, Col. 1



Ayo Handy wants to develop a Black Love Day.

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## A Day for Black Love

GILLIAM, From B1

exposure to racism, military oppression and drugs," she says.

Returning to Washington, she enrolled in Washington Technical Institute, and was carrying her first son when she graduated in 1973. Despite an "in-the-closet addiction to cocaine, alcohol and marijuana," she had a second son and graduated from Antioch College in 1978 with a bachelor's degree in community organizing.

Her 10-year marriage ended in 1980. But she still had not confronted her "greatest challenge"—drug addiction.

She overcame that struggle over a five-year period, with the help of a loving family, the development of her spirituality and the adoption of a wholistic lifestyle. She has been drug-free since 1985, she says.

Even as she was battling to love herself enough to stop self-destructive behavior, however, there was a part of her pushing toward recovery and in positive directions. In 1980, she started a publication called "Positive Energy Newsletter," which offered writing opportunities for many creative people in the Washington area.

I met Ayo several years ago when she handed me copies of her newsletter. I liked some of the articles it contained, and over the years occasionally picked it up in health food stores.

I also was impressed with her development of the African-American Holiday Expo, an economic self-help project she has operated since 1982, as well as her founding of the African-American Holiday Foundation, a nonprofit organization that encourages "value-centered" alternatives to traditional overly commercialized holidays.

But I decided to write about her when I got a good feeling

hearing her talk on the radio the week about "Black Love Day."

Lord knows, I thought as she talked, we needed more black love—not as a way of excluding any other races, but as a focus fill a void within some communities. The levels of hopelessness and despair that have surfaced and that have turned inward have resulted in what appears to be unprecedented levels of self-hatred. "We have such a void in loving relationships," she said, "creating violence among ourselves, disruptions between families and couples, between fathers and sons, people who don't have mates feeling lonely and deprived."

Research reveals that holidays tend to intensify depression and stress in everyone. But African Americans—some of whom already feel left out of the society—experience ever greater levels of low self-esteem, financial hardships and self-hatred, Ayo says.

She hopes her idea of an alternative holiday to Valentine's Day will become as institutionalized as Kwanzaa, an African American holiday celebrated the week after Christmas.

The conference, scheduled from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., includes vendors and workshops on topics such as teenage love and sexuality; love between adults and their parents; interracial relationships; abusive relationships; loving one's self when alone; keeping love alive, couples who stay together. Lecturer Laila O. Afrika will deliver the keynote on "The Secret to Enhanced Black Male Sexuality."

I talked to Ayo a long time because I think her conference will be good for the community. She smiled as we parted. But what else would you expect from a loving, caring person whose name means "joy"?